

John Donne and the New Universe. Retaking the issue

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No, no dejéis cerradas

las puertas de la noche

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In her *Introduction* to the Spanish edition of John Donne's *Songs and Sonnets*, Purificación Ribes touches briefly on the subject of scientific development during the Renaissance:

Numerosos críticos han llamado la atención sobre la actualidad de sus imágenes, a menudo vinculadas a los ámbitos de la Astronomía, la Física, la Medicina, la Geografía, la Botánica e incluso la Alquimia. En sus poemas son constantes las alusiones a las esferas, los mapas, los músculos, el cerebro, las raíces, o el elixir de la Alquimia, y lo son en una proporción más elevada que en cualquier otro poeta coetáneo. Pero esta frecuencia de uso, que pone de relieve un interés por todo cuanto le rodea, no debe llevarnos a erróneas hipótesis que lo califiquen de innovador. Donne en éste, como en otros aspectos, participa plenamente de los postulados de su época. Y en la Inglaterra de finales del siglo XVI se suscribían de manera generalizada las doctrinas de Ptolomeo, Plinio, Aristóteles o Galeno. (1996: 15-16)

Purificación Ribes has done a highly valuable job of philological elucidation. Her edition is full of perceptive comments and helpful notes. Nevertheless, I have the feeling that in her brief discussion about Donne's handling of Renaissance scientific ideas, Ribes has entirely misconstrued the issue. Her opinion springs, after all, from an age-old tradition of criticism that refuses to acknowledge Donne's commitment to some of the most hazardous and far-reaching aspects of the Copernican world-view. This tradition grew with and is largely influenced by English literary provincialism, cultural insularity, and a dogged resolve to turn Donne into a partisan of religious orthodoxy. The critical strategy underlying this tradition is to remove the most strident, heterodox, and daring aspects of Donne's world-view by reducing them to mere figurative waste or rhetorical extravagance. Rosemund Tuve was the critic who most insisted on the rhetorical nature of some of Donne's most hazardous images. A systematic application of her central view would force us to understand the identification between the two lovers and a world or between the idealized woman and a world in poems like *The Good Morrow*, *The Sun Rising* and *The First Anniversarie*, as being mere instances of the trope of *amplificatio* or *hyperbole*. This kind of understanding accounts for the proliferation of marginal and shallow paraphrase, in the form of rhapsodic footnotes, referring to the new cosmological ideas that are so pervasive in the editions of Donne's love and religious poetry. Any cosmological expression that hints at the existence of a sun-centered planetary system, of an infinite or eccentric universe, or of a plurality of worlds, is readily accounted for by means of an *ad hoc* footnote reference to Donne's intellectual curiosity and to his occasional and playful manipulation of ideas coming from the new science. Despite this intermittent presence of extravagant ideas, Donne's

poetry is regarded by these critics as an orthodox body of writing framed within an orthodox body of cosmological, theological, and political theory. His cosmological extravagance is seen as the result of a calculated and controlled rhetorical *mise en scène*, rather than as the effect of an inescapable verbal errancy originating in epistemological puzzle. The new universe that his poems ostensibly formulate is regarded as a sort of figurative surplus stemming from the rhetorical investment of the figure of *hyperbole*. I quote from Tuve's study:

Hence it seems to me illegitimate to fit out Donne's poems with overtones which diverge ambiguously from his apparent meaning and which are only to be traced in the connotations of his image-terms. (1947: 213)

Donne becomes here the *surer artist*, in full possession of his verse and in complete command of his tropes. The latter are regarded as capricious turns and whimsical acrobacies deliberately veiling the expression of certitudes and ideas fostered by the *clearer and more mature thinker* (Tuve 1947: 213). Needless to say, *mature* stands in this context for *traditional*, i.e., *orthodox*. And yet, the hypothesis of an intellectually *mature* and *clear* Donne necessarily overlooked the charge of skepticism so frequently levelled against the English poet. To remove this charge became another way of playing down the extent and depth of Donne's commitment to the new universe. T.S.Eliot, the most influential of critics, said in 1931 in an essay entitled "Donne in his Time": "Donne was, I insist, no sceptic" (Spencer 1932: 11-12). If we go back to his earlier approach to Donne, especially to the *Clark Lectures* delivered at Trinity College (Cambridge) in 1926, the picture that he draws is still basically the same, although there is a strenuous and rather obsessive insistence on the formally aberrant nature of his belief. The English poet is not seen as a sceptic, but as a potential believer lacking the gift of consistent feeling and clear thought. Donne is described as:

(a) mind of the trecento in disorder; capable of experiencing and setting down many super-sensuous feelings, only these feelings are of a mind in chaos, not of a mind in order. The immediate experience passes into thought; and this thought, far from attaining belief, is thought "insincere", because it does not reach belief; but his feeling of the thought is perfectly sincere. (1993: 133)

One can hardly avoid thinking on the bewilderment that a paragraph like this could produce on a tough-minded linguist and philosopher as Searle, should he ever come across it in one of his off-the-job vagaries. I am not simply surmising. The irony, I think, runs much deeper. In his thoughtful analysis of the nature of intentional states, Searle declared that in order to understand a belief as a representation we had to consider both a *propositional content* and a *psychological mode* that determined its *direction of fit* (1983: 12). We need only to apply this terminology to Eliot's judgement to realize that he acknowledges the presence of a propositional content or thought in Donne's verse while rejecting the existence of a true *direction of fit*. The perplexed manner of Eliot's argument finds therefore an unexpected echo in Searle's own words:

What shall we say about those Intentional states that do not have a direction of fit? Are they representations too? And, if so, what are their conditions of satisfaction? And what about fantasy and imagination? And what do they represent? (1983: 13-14)

These are exactly the questions that should concern us in our attempt to understand Eliot's remarks. "Las ideas se tienen. En las creencias se está": Ortega's famous *dictum* comes promptly to mind to help us in our task, for we are trying to understand the nature of a poetic representation - a thought - which apparently refuses to turn into belief. The traditional idea is that Donne could aptly think and cogently represent an infinite and chaotic universe in which he never believed. In my opinion, the entire issue is made to rest upon a fanciful psychological mystification, i.e., the "direction of fit" which is almost without exception eradicated from Donne's alleged pre-poetic mental states. Donne thought, he represented his thought, but did not believe in it. This baffles me. The perplexity deepens when I see Eliot change the nature of his accusations. His original picture of a poet incapable of belief becomes the picture of a poet incapable of thought. The American poet had used Dante as an example of a poet capable of reconciling a metaphysical system and a poetical world. Unlike Dante,

Donne had no philosophy at all (...) I judge him (apart from the large proportion of his reading which is not medieval at all) by the way in which he read, and judge

him to be exactly of his own moment of time. What is clear is that Donne read a great deal without order or valuation, and that he thought in a spasmodic and fragmentary way when he thought at all. (1993: 83)

The paragraph by Purificación Ribes that I quoted at the beginning of this essay should be read in the light of this concrete prejudice. According to Eliot, Donne read broadly, but his readings followed no order, accorded to no plan. Donne thought scarcely, and when he did his thoughts were fragmentary and nourished no possible belief: "it is never quite certain that he believes anything" (1983: 132). This assumption survives among those critics who, like Ribes, see in Donne's references to the new universe a mere evidence of his anarchic and updated erudition. Let's consider first one of the unspoken premises of this assumption. It seems quite clear that Eliot's judgement is dominated by a powerful underlying belief: good or strong poets (Lucretius, Dante, Goethe) inscribe their verse within a solid philosophical system. Such assumption had been validated by George Santayana, the Spanish-born American philosopher that taught at Harvard at the beginning of the century and whose course on religion, belief and poetry T.S.Eliot attended in June of 1910 (some of the ideas that Santayana was using in this course entered into his book *Three Philosophical Poets*, 1910). According to Santayana, poetry is an expression of the idea and not an ornament to the idea ("Poetry cannot be spread upon things like butter", Santayana 1936: 331). But this theory can be no longer hold. Bloom has sufficiently proved that strong poets do not introduce their verse in a preexisting system, but rather create their own philosophical systems through their verse. Poetry is cognition. Rather than using ideas, strong poets generate ideas in the linguistic and rhetorical medium of their verse. And these ideas are always fragmentary forms of a fragmentary and changing belief.

In spite of striking differences of thought and temperament, Tuve and Eliot meet in their ability to overlook a major problem: "what does a poem mean?". This question can hardly be separated from the central and implicit puzzle of traditional poetics: "How does a poem mean?" Tuve seems to maintain that the meaning of a poem is somehow independent of its rhetorical or figurative dimension, that is to say, that the tropological stance serves only to give a certain twist to a meaning which is already there. Her view springs from the old prejudice that conceives rhetorical figures as clothes that cover thoughts. "Die Sprache verkleidet die Gedanken" said Wittgenstein in his *Tractatus* (1985: 68). The post-kantian supporters of the ornamental conception of rhetorics would transform this sentence into the following: "Die (rhetorische) Sprache verkleidet die Gedanken". The idea is already present in Dante, who in his *Vita Nuova* declared: "Grande vergogna sarebbe a colui che rimasse cose sotto veste di figura o di colore retorico, e poscia, domandato, non sapesse denudare le sue parole da cotale vesta" (1994: 196). It is not an accident that Paul de Man should speak, in a polemical essay, of the "perennial problem" and "recognized source of embarrassment" that metaphors, tropes, and figural language in general traditionally meant for philosophical discourse and literary analysis (1978: 16). Eliot, in turn, seems to assume that a poem means insofar as it can be properly placed within a larger metaphysical frame. How are we then to understand the following metaphors:

She is all States, and all Princes, I.
Nothing else is. (*The Sun Rising*)

Let sea-discoverers to new worlds have gone,
Let Maps to other, worlds on worlds have showne,
Let us possesse one world, each hath one, and is one. (*The Good Morrow*)

Are these metaphors to be inserted within a larger Neoplatonic theory capable of accomodating the plural outrage of an infinitely expanded soul, or of the lovers turned into a single world? Are these metaphors to be read, then, as sincere manifestations of a Neoplatonic belief, or are they to be understood as mere exaggerations, extravagant hyperboles of a burning and restless imagination? These questions conceal a deeper issue: is it legitimate to distinguish between what is said and what is meant inside a poem? Under which conditions are we allowed to surmise that rhetorical or figurative language means something? How are we to decide the exact extent of Donne's commitment to the semantic strength of his imagery? Is this imagery ornamental, marginal,

incidental, accessory and meaningless, or is it, on the contrary, essential, central, necessary and meaningful? In other words: are these images *metaphors* at all? I think that we should always consider the possibility that Donne's Copernican and Neoplatonic imagery is not just a persuasive or ornamental device - a *performative* trope or *masquerader* - but rather, and to remain in De Man's use of Austin's terminology, that such imagery is loaded with a precise *cognitive* or *constative* force (De Man 1979: 119-131). This inevitably entails the acceptance of one the most disturbing lessons that the Belgian critic was ever to derive from Nietzsche:

Tropes are not understood aesthetically, as ornament, nor are they understood semantically as a figurative meaning that derives from literal, proper denomination. Rather, the reverse is the case. The trope is not a derived, marginal, or aberrant form of language but the linguistic paradigm par excellence. The figurative structure is not one linguistic mode among others but it characterizes language as such. (1979: 105)

This resource to De Man's understanding of language implies a number of risks. First of all, his idea of literature was too drastically confined to things written after Rousseau. Second, he never quite managed to explain the nature of what he called the "cognitive dimension" of language. In any event, what seems indisputable is that his restless exploration on the sources of rhetorical meaning helped to unveil many misconceptions about the nature of authorial intention. It is no longer possible, I think, to speak of language, emotion, thought, belief and reality as if they were separate things that a writer can handle at will, in an objective fashion. And that is exactly what Ribes is doing when she speaks of the "frequency of use" (*frecuencia de uso*) of certain scientific images in Donne's poetry as the consequence of a contemporary interest, shared by many writers of his time, in the spectacular advancement of their many learnings.

This problem echoes the countless perplexities that arise when we inspect the way in which critics discuss Shakespeare's cosmological imagery. The traditional position, largely invented by Tillyard (1990: 17-25), is to insist on his orthodox and conservative acceptance of the old, medieval, Ptolemaic world, and to disclaim his adventures into the world of infinity, chaos, disproportion (so abundant in his tragedies and Roman plays) as mere rhetorical devices intended to enhance the dramatic atmosphere of the plays. Moreover, this assumption found unexpected support on previous readings by Spurgeon and Clemen, a body of rhetorical interpretation which doubtless helped to systematize the verbal manifestations of chaos in Shakespeare's writing. From a contemporary point of view, this assumption seems to leave too many questions unanswered. To begin with, it impairs literary analysis with the burden of a catastrophic conception of historiography. The entire discussion becomes undesirably Hegelian: the critic noses about the texts with the only interest of finding out whether the author's spirit was active before or after a certain break, i.e., to ascertain the author's insertion within the all-embracing dialectic sway of the Absolute spirit: is Donne a medieval or a Renaissance thinker? Where is his verse located, before or after the break? Hegelian is still, after all, the dominating conception of cultural history that speaks about *world-views*, *world-pictures*, *Weltanschauungen*, *paradigms* and a large etcetera of related notions. We could also include two presumably anti-Hegelian ideas, Foucault's *épistémè* or *categorie de pensée* (1966: 45-48) and Althusser's *coupure épistémologique*. This last notion seems particularly helpful, for it aptly describes the mechanism of change that presumably gave birth to new renaissance science. The history of this notion is particularly fascinating. The Marxist philosopher first used this term in 1965 in his book *Pour Marx*. The English edition, *For Marx*, offered a discussion of this metaphor in the "Glossary" (1969: 249). In "A letter to the translator" (1969: 257-258) Althusser explained his indebtedness to Bachelard's *La formation de l'esprit scientifique*, even though the term was not to be found in his work. Moreover, Althusser declared that his use of the metaphor was removed from Canguilhem's non-systematic application of it in his *Études d'Histoire et de Philosophie des Sciences*. In *Lire le Capital*, the French philosopher employed a number of related metaphors, like "mutation épistémologique" (1969 I: 11), "décalage théorique" (I: 17), "changement du terrain", "changement d'horizon" (I: 24), "crise dialectique" (I: 28), "rupture épistémologique" (II: 11) all of which seemed to announce the firmly established trope of "coupure épistémologique" (II: 16). Some of these alternative metaphors, especially *change of horizon* and *change of terrain*, seem particularly appropriate to the nature of the progressive change that took place in the epistemological foundations of renaissance cosmology. Moreover, they refer to such change in terms of a temporal sequence,

unlike the metaphor *coupure*, which entails a drastic, sudden and mechanical transformation. Althusser's terminological hesitation was an evidence of his problematic understanding of the idea of epistemological change. He was aware that such change could only take place in discourse, that any epistemological transformation was after all the result of precise textual *events*, to use an idea explored by Deleuze (1969: 15-30). It is in this context of linguistic awareness that we should insert our discussion of Donne's commitment to the epistemology of the new science, for it is in this very context that rhetorical events could become invested of an extraordinary cognitive significance. The uncritical assumption that distinguishes between central poetic meanings, inserted in larger ideological or theoretical frames, and marginal or surrounding rhetorical trifle should be, therefore, severely corrected. Rhetorical language is the only language. It accounts for innovation in the epistemological grounds of science and philosophy. And it also accounts, as Hayden White has skillfully argued, for the strategies of emplotment that characterize the narrative forms of history (1989: 25-26). If there is a cognitive change, we can only know of it through metaphor. For metaphor means, after all, *translation*: movement, change, *décalage*. Moreover, it is quite pointless to ask whether we plan our metaphors or whether we believe in them or not. In this sense, I would like to quote from Jameson's penetrating essay on the nature of postmodern theory. He summarizes a new historicist axiom embodied in the Michael-Knapp program essay "Against theory":

That is not, however, what the essay "meant" by "theory", something that can be recapitulated with all the concision of its authors, namely, "the tendency to generate theoretical problems by splitting apart terms that are in fact inseparable" (AT 12). This tendency is then identified and localized in two kinds of privileged error: the separation of "authorial intention and the meaning of texts" (AT 12), and a larger, or more "epistemological" pathology, in which "knowledge" is separated from "beliefs", generating the notion that we can somehow "stand outside our beliefs" (AT 27). (1991: 182)

Now we see that both Tuve and Eliot were under a theoretical spell, a sort of pathology that manifests itself in the form of compulsive split or separation: Tuve separated the authorial intention from the meaning of the text, and Eliot separates knowledge from belief. What Jameson has just outlined is more a hermeneutic manner than a tradition. A manner of looking at Donne, a reading habit which we could describe as conservative and ingenuous. Fortunately, this manner was revised early-on. This revision began as an acknowledgement that Donne's familiarity with the new cosmological theories was something more than a caprice. In the *Introduction* to his famous edition of the *Metaphysical Lyrics and Poems of the Seventeenth Century*, Grierson mentions "the new science of Copernicus and Galileo" (1995: 2) and "the new learning of Copernicus and Paracelsus" (1995: 7). These were just scattered and fragmentary references. The first serious steps were taken by Marjorie Nicolson in her essays of the thirties devoted to the impact of the new astronomy in the English literary imagination. But it was Coffin who was to write in 1937 the first large study on the subject, *John Donne and the New Philosophy*. And it is within this tradition of criticism, prone to listen to outlandish voices within Donne's writing, that Empson began, in the late forties, to write his essays on so polemic a subject. These essays have been recently published on a single volume under the title *John Donne and the New Philosophy* by Cambridge University Press. Paradoxically enough, this publication coincided with the edition of Eliot's *Clark Lectures* entitled *The Varieties of Metaphysical Poetry*. None of these books are mentioned by Purificación Ribes in the bibliography of her 1996 Spanish edition of the *Songs and Sonnets*. She might have submitted her manuscript to the editors before these books were published in England. This wouldn't explain, however, the omission of Coffin's study, published - I repeat - in 1937. In any case, and leaving aside the reasons for these regrettable exclusions, I would like to emphasize the importance of these books, and especially of Empson's study, for it throws new light on the open-ended discussion about Donne's *philosophy*. And yet, I find it necessary to anticipate a serious warning. Despite the immense effort Empson made to prove Donne's knowledge of the cosmological theories of the new philosophy, his hypothesis seems rather impractical for it is devastated by terminological inaccuracy. Too many and too different things fall into the all-embracing category of *new philosophy*, and this ambiguity is something that Empson inherited from his predecessors in this line of research. I will just single out the most relevant epistemological frames traditionally associated with the idea of new philosophy:

- Italian Neoplatonism of the XVth century, with its version of a metaphysical *Pampsychism*, and theories of the Universal Mind.
- The so-called Copernican theory (*De Revolutionibus Orbium Caelestium*, 1543) which is the result of a mathematical hypothesis.
- Kepler's mathematical research and his pseudo-scientific visions of space-travel in *Somnium* (available to Donne in 1610).
- Galileo's empirical investigations with the telescope in Venice. (*Sidereus Nuncius*, 1610)

These frames are very different and sometimes openly opposed. Their epistemological statuses are extremely distant: metaphysical, mathematical, empirical ... Moreover, the books in which these frames appear obey to altogether different textual rules. References to the Copernican sun-centered planetary system are frequent in Donne's writings, both in his poetry and in his prose. Copernicus himself became a character in Donne's modest *Inferno*, his *Ignatius his Conclave* (1610) where he was portrayed in a sympathetic fashion. Kepler and Galileo were also present in this work, although not in personal robes, like Copernicus, but through references to the new stars (1969: 7) that echo both Kepler's discoveries of two *stellae novae* (1602 and 1604) and Galileo's description of new stars with the help of the *cannocchiale* or telescope (Galilei 1993: 86). But these discoveries are empirical discoveries and have nothing to do with the mathematical research carried out by Copernicus, let alone the Neo-platonic pantheism of Cusa (Cassirer 1976: 53-102) or the Atomism (Kargon 1983: 15-29; Jesi 1972: 151-184) which was quickly spreading through England sometimes disguised as Occultism or Alchemy. These two traditions met in the Northumberland Circle, a sort of esoteric brotherhood of intellectuals, scientists and writers, led by the Earl of Northumberland. John Donne didn't hide his sympathy towards some members of this group, (John Dee, Thomas Harriot, Nicholas Hill, Thomas Digges); he owned some of their books, like Hill's *Philosophia Epicurea* (1601), and he had met personally the Wizard Earl. This connection, which is beginning to be thoughtfully explored in recent years (Haffenden 1993: 37-42), will throw decisive light on the problem of Donne's ideology or world-view. Moreover, this recent line of research, somehow fostered by Francis Yates seminal studies on the *Art of Memory*, has helped to bring to sharp focus the figure of Giordano Bruno, probably the most important philosopher of the period, a thinker who spent two decisive years in England (1583-1585), where he published his most relevant philosophical dialogues, *La cena de le ceneri*, *De l'infinito universo e i mondi*, *De la causa, principio et uno*, *Spaccio de la Bestia trionfante*, *Cabala del cavallo pegaseo* and *Eroici furori*. Bruno's world-view was an adaptation of Precocratic ideas about the infinity of the world and Neoplatonic (Plotinian) ideas about a Universal Soul/Mind to the Copernican cosmological system (Jiménez Heffernan 1997: 223-302). What Bruno did was to follow with unknown consistency and feverish determination one of Copernicus' explicit suggestions. The Polish astronomer could not accept the hypothesis of an infinite universe within his mathematical construction, for this acceptance meant doing away with the scientific rigour of his research. However, he openly invited philosophers to consider such possibility: "sive igitur finitus sit mundus, sive infinitus, disputationi physiologorum dimittamus" (1975: 72), that is, "we leave it to the philosophers to decide whether the world is finite or infinite". In his English translation of some decisive books of Copernicus' *De revoutionibus*, Thomas Digges introduced the same idea of an infinite expansion of the last sphere (Digges 1934). And yet, Digges' infinity remained basically a religious heaven, although there is still strong evidence supporting the thesis that he might have had empirical access to a telescope (Johnson 1968: 173-175). Bruno's infinity stems, on the contrary, from a complex metaphysical hypothesis, its most immediate and dangerous consequence being the unflinching identificacion between transcendence and immanence (Gentile 1991: 109-120). Bruno's universe becomes an ontological realm of pure immanence and infinite possibility (Ciliberto 1996: 70-78). The dominating assumption of a *mens insita omnibus*, of a universal mind pervading the entire universe was paradoxically reconciled with the picture of an indeterminate, aberrant, eccentric, and chaotic world. According to Blumenberg "Bruno's universe is without coherence and structure" (1987: 367). The Italian thinker did away with the Aristotelian idea of place. Nothing, in Bruno's universe, occupies a fixed place, a determinate location (Jiménez Heffernan 1996: 439-451). All things - stars, planets, seas, stones, animals, human beings, elements -

occupy a transitory place in a world made of a single and ever-changing substance; a world which is placeless place, or, like Wallace Stevens' *place of the solitaires*, a place in *perpetual undulation*:

Ecco la raggion de la mutazion vicissitudinale del tutto, per cui cosa non è di male da cui non s'esca, cosa non è di buono a cui non s'incorra, mentre per l'infinito campo, per la perpetua mutazione, tutta la sustanza persevera medesima ed una. (Bruno 1958: 359)

I am obviously summarizing the basic characteristics of Bruno's universe. I think, however, that this brief picture is enough to allow me to suggest the nature of Bruno's influence of Donne:

1. One is the feeling of *permanent dislocation of place* that we find in Donne's verse and also in his *Sermons* and *Devotions*. We perceive it in the line "She is all States, and all Princes, I" that seems written inside the furious grammar of cosmological desire which is typically Brunian (Nelson 1958)
2. The second is the feeling of *existencial urge* (in the forms of erotic compulsion or eschatological anxiety) that dominates his verse and that he shares with other metaphysical poets, like Herbert or Marvell. This urge can be better understood if set against the background of Bruno's infinite, restless, and ever-changing universe.

In relation to the first of the characteristics mentioned, the dislocation of place, I would like to make reference to a specific rhetorical strategy, the imagery of flight, that we find in *Ignatius his Conclave* and that is taken directly from Bruno's *Cena de le ceneri*:

I was in an Extasie, and *My little wandring sportful Soule, / Ghest, and Companion of my body*, had liberty to wander through all places, and to survey and reckon all the roomes, and all the volumes of the heavens, and to comprehend the situation, the dimensions, the nature, the people, and the policy, both of the swimming Islands, the Planets, and of all those which are fixed in the firmament. (Donne 1969: 6-7)

Or ecco quello, ch'ha varcato l'aria, penetrato il cielo, discorse le stelle, traspasati gli margini del mondo, fatte svanir le fantastiche muraglia de le prime, ottave, none, decime ed altre, che vi s'avesser potuto aggiongere ... (Bruno 1958: 33)

There is something inescapably Marlovian about this spatial frenzy, about this irrefrenable vocation to break through cosmological limits. The immediate effect of such cognitive urge was wisely described by Greenblatt as an *absence of scenery*: "That man is homeless, that all places are alike, is linked to man's inner state, to the uncircumscribed hell he carries within" (Greenblatt 1980: 197). In Bruno, this uncircumscribed hell took the form of an limitless heaven. Identically, Donne could terminate his inspection of hell - "I saw all the roomes of Hell open to my sight" (1969: 7) - but he could never bring his exploration of heaven to a proper end, nor exhaust his strength when looking into the *lovers infinitenesse*. Donne's world looks very much like Bruno's: both are unbounded, placeless, unrestrained, ontologically productive and fearfully erotic.

Before I finish, I would like to tease out some implications from one of the adjectives I have just used: *placeless*. Louis Martz wrote in the fifties a famous study in which he managed to prove that Donne's poetry was strongly influenced by St. Ignatius' *Spiritual Exercices*, and that many of his poems were actually written using the structure of the Ignatian meditation. According to the Spanish saint, the first step in a meditative exercise was the *composition of place*, that is, the imaginative visualization of a concrete place where the drama of the devotional dialogue between a man and the Lord was going to occur. Martz applied this meditative model to many metaphysical poems. Oddly enough, Martz used Donne's *First Anniversarie*. If we look closely at this poem, we realize that instead of a composition of place, the poet has chosen to bring forth a *decomposition of place*. Donne opposes two worlds, a separate world of harmony where the little girl's soul is going to escape to and an immanent world of utter disproportion and chaos. It is my contention that this last world is probably a poetical reformulation of Bruno's chaotic and aberrant infinite universe. Many lines of

this poem create an exact reverse or inversion of Ulyses' famous speech of order in Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida* (I,iii,75-137). Chaos, destruction, endless production and eternal transformation are the Brunian notions that support the imaginative construction of this amazing poem:

Which, from the carcasce of the old world, free,
Creates a new world; and new creatures be
Produced (75-77)

We are borne ruinous: poor mothers crie,
That children come not right, nor orderly,
Except they headlong come, and fall upon
An ominous precipitation. (95-99)

Then, as mankinde, so is the worlds whole frame
Quite out of joynt, almost created lame. (191-192)

Wronging each joynt of th'universall frame (198)

So did the world from the first hour decay,
The evening was beginning of the day (200-201)

The Sun is lost, and th'earth, and no mans wit
Can well direct him, where to looke for it. (207-208)

Tis all in pieces, all cohaerence gone. (213)

To go to heaven, we make heaven como to us. (282)

The worlds proportion disfigured is. (303)

Utter immanence, sheer relativism, relentless eccentricity. These three are constant figurative features of the Brunian universe. But where does the figure end? Which are the limits of the trope, the limits of the game? Where does Donne stop using an idea and begins to beleive in it? Where does the rhetorical *mise en scène* cancel out making room for knowledge? To the knowledge - now we truly realize it - that all scenes are impossible, that the *absence of scene* is something more than a figurative atmosphere, a rhetorical ornament, or a frenzied dance of tropes. The meaning of this poem is still an arresting puzzle for many critics. The problem is that most readers have confined their attention to the religious symbolism of the girl's cosmological redemption. What if we look instead at the aberrant world, the *ominous precipitation* that the girl is leaving behind? What if we look at the *deserts of vast eternity* or at the merciless hurry of Time in Marvell's *To his Coy Mistress*? What if we look at the bottomless chaos over which Milton's characters play their heroic games of salvation? We might begin to realize that certain *metaphors*, certain *amplifications* and certain *hyperboles* are the real meaning of poems, and that the rest is just an organized escape from this central and unbearable chaos. It is through words that we change horizons. It is through words that we move from one terrain to another. It is through words too that we loose horizons, loose terrain. And that is a strange form of cognition that we can hardly express and that we sometimes call *infinite* life, sometimes *infinite* love: "No, no dejéis cerradas / las puertas de la noche."

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